

VZCZCXRO8527

PP RUEHAG RUEHAST RUEHDA RUEHDBU RUEHDF RUEHFL RUEHIK RUEHKW RUEHLA
RUEHLM RUEHLZ RUEHNP RUEHPOD RUEHROV RUEHSK RUEHSL RUEHSR RUEHVK
RUEHYG
DE RUEHTI #0448/01 1871437
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 061437Z JUL 09
FM AMEMBASSY TIRANA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8282
RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 TIRANA 000448

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EUR/SCE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PGOV KDEM PREL AL

SUBJECT: ELECTION UPDATE

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED - PLEASE TREAT ACCORDINGLY

¶11. (SBU) SUMMARY: On July 3, the Central Election Commission (CEC) announced preliminary election results, giving Sali Berisha's Democratic Party coalition a 71-65 lead over the Socialist Party coalition in terms of seats won. The SP immediately cried foul, saying the CEC has no right to discuss preliminary results (whether or not the statement was illegal remains a matter of debate in legal circles). The CEC is still deliberating over the fate of a number of "irregular" ballot boxes from Fier district, although a decision on the boxes is expected on Tuesday. At least 15 electoral "challenges" have been filed by various small parties so far, with none filed by any of the three largest parties (LSI, DP and SP), although it is almost certain that some challenges will be filed later. On July 4, former PM and Chairman of the Movement for Socialist Integration (LSI) Party Ilir Meta announced his decision to enter into a coalition with the DP, theoretically giving Sali Berisha the support of four more MPs when Parliament convenes in September. But Meta's announcement has touched off much grumbling within the ranks of LSI, and given the fluid nature of

Albanian politics, Meta's announcement should be taken with several boxes of salt. END SUMMARY.

Election Results Still Pending

¶12. (SBU) The CEC has not yet announced the final results of the June 28 election, known as the "tabulation of results". And even when that announcement does come, likely sometime on Tuesday, it will only open the door to a large number of expected challenges to the results, meaning truly final results will only come sometime near the end of July, when all challenges and appeals have been heard. The CEC did announce "preliminary results" on July 3, an announcement that touched off a firestorm of criticism from the SP, which claimed that the CEC has no legal right to announce even preliminary results prior to the completion of the counting of all votes (whether or not the CEC statement truly was illegal remains a matter of debate).

¶13. (SBU) The CEC has at least six disputed boxes left to count from Fier district. According to CEC, SP and DP sources, the CEC must first tabulate the results from Fier, minus the votes contained inside the six "irregular boxes," at which point the SP will challenge the tabulation and force the CEC to make a decision on whether or not to open and count the disputed boxes. Although the SP claims that the DP is trying to block consideration of the disputed boxes, one DP source told PolOff that the DP would have no grounds to block the counting of the six boxes. If the CEC determines that the votes left in the six boxes are not enough to change the outcome of the election in Fier, it can deny the request to open the boxes. But because the six boxes contain a large number of votes, it seems unlikely that the CEC would make this determination. Mayor of Tirana and SP leader Edi Rama told OSCE Ambassador on July 5 that the SP would boycott the CEC and any parliamentary assembly if the Fier boxes are not counted before the challenges process begins, although at a July 6 press conference,

Rama's boycott threat was more vague, and seemed to imply the SP would walk out only in the event the CEC decides not to count the boxes at all.

¶4. (SBU) According to the CEC, the Fier boxes will likely be opened and counted only on Tuesday, following an expected SP challenge to the "tabulation of results", a process which should end sometime on Monday or Tuesday. Following a decision on the Fier boxes, the CEC will begin hearing electoral challenges. As of July 6, at least 15 challenges have been filed by smaller parties, with no challenges filed (yet) by the SP, DP or LSI.

LSI, Berisha Announce Coalition

¶5. (SBU) In a press conference on July 4, LSI leader Ilir Meta announced his intention to accept Sali Berisha's invitation to Meta to join in a coalition with Berisha's DP when Parliament convenes in September. Adding LSI's four votes to the DP's 70 or 71 (depending on the CEC final vote tabulation) would make at least 74/75 votes in favor of Berisha as PM (71 votes are needed to approve the PM). Meta described the decision to join forces with the PD as "the most difficult decision" of his political career, and said he remains a socialist, but added that he would join forces with Berisha "for the sake of Albanian integration". In a separate interview with VOA, Meta said he had turned down an offer to enter into a coalition with SP Leader Edi Rama, alleging that the SP had bought the votes of other MPs in the Democratic Party in order to form a coalition - something Meta claimed he could not be a part of.

¶6. (SBU) COMMENT: Meta's announcement of an intended coalition with Berisha caught many observers off guard, most of whom had assumed that the lifelong socialist would never cut a deal with Berisha. Numerous sources told the Embassy that Meta's decision has touched

TIRANA 00000448 002 OF 002

off a firestorm of grumbling and criticism within LSI, and an LSI official announced that the party will hold a national party conference on July 7 to discuss the deal with Berisha. Most observers believe that Meta will use the conference to convince or force the rest of his party leadership to go along with his coalition deal, although it remains to be seen how the party rank and file react. Although Meta claimed that he was entering a coalition with Berisha for the sake of the country, LSI insiders readily admit that Meta has little choice - after a dismal showing in the elections, the party must either make a deal to get it back into power, or risk extinction as a party. Given the fluid nature of Albanian politics, Meta's announcement should be seen as only the first shot in what promises to be a protracted war of deal making and breaking between now and the opening of the new parliament in September.

WITHERS